Teaching Children How to READ

by Elaine M. Bukowiecki

By employing a variety of instructional practices with students every day, teachers can be the key to improving the literacy of their students.

Regardless of the age, grade level, and reading proficiency of the student, the teacher is a valuable component in the reading act. A teacher can be a guide to the primary-grade student as the child connects letters with sounds, background knowledge, sight words, and oral with written language to read his or her first book. An instructor also can assist the intermediate-grade learner in interpreting and explaining the author's message in the novel or nonfiction text this student is reading.

"Qualified and talented teachers are essential if effective, evidence-based reading instruction is to occur" (Farstrup 2002, 1). Knowledge and implementation of exemplary and efficacious instructional practices and materials for teaching literacy are formidable tasks for any teacher, both novice and

experienced. "Becoming an informed reading teacher means that you will be effective because you not only know what to do as a teacher, but you know why you are doing it" (Harp and Brewer 2005, 1).

While many teachers in today's schools are mandated to use prescriptive basal reading programs (Open Court, for example), which are based on the scientific research found in the National Reading Panel's report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD] 2000), a teacher should know much more to become an effective instructor of reading. This article describes pertinent information regarding national and state standards and tests; instructional techniques for teaching word recognition, fluency, vocabulary knowledge, and comprehension skills; the selection of appropriate texts and materials; reader response; the diverse student learner; and a variety of authentic assessments that teachers should be aware of to be successful reading educators.

Standards

The National Reading Panel (NICHD 2000) published its research results and recommendations in a report entitled *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*. This national report presented five key literacy topics—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension—that should be included in daily literacy instruction.

Though the National Reading Panel and its published report have stirred much controversy (Allington 2002; Ehri and Stahl 2001; Garan 2001; Smith 2003; Yatvin 2002), state departments of education have based their state frameworks and tests on the tenets of this panel's research. Additionally, the federal government has sponsored the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, which focuses on state test scores and the annual progress all students make on each state assessment (Ryan and Cooper 2004; Sturrock 2003). To provide effective and relevant literacy instruction, a teacher should be aware of the National Reading Panel's report, the controversy surrounding it, state standards, high-stakes testing, and the influence that state standards and national directives have on a school district's literacy curriculum.

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Word Recognition

The written English language is based on the alphabetic principle that means letters are used to represent sounds. "In a perfect alphabet, only one letter represents only one sound, and so readers can pronounce any written word by simply associating sounds with letters" (Fox 2004, 3). However, the English alphabet is not perfect. Thus, one letter can represent one sound; two or more letters can represent one sound; a silent final vowel can affect the sound of the medial vowel; and many words have letters that are not sounded.

Teachers should be aware of the interconnection between letters and sounds in the English language, know about the various stages children pass through as they develop word fluency and spelling skills, and have a repertoire of instructional strategies and materials readily available to teach students letter-sound associations. In addition, instructors must have a clear understanding of several important terms associated with word recognition:

- **Phonological awareness:** a broad category of language, which refers to the awareness of and the ability to manipulate words, syllables, rhymes, and sounds
- **Phonemic awareness:** the ability to think analytically about the sounds in words
- **Phonics:** the systematic relationship between letters and sounds
- **Structural analysis:** the large structural units that make up words—prefixes, suffixes, compound words, contractions, and syllables
- **Sight words:** words that are recognized quickly, accurately, and effortlessly by the reader

Teachers should know the meaning of these word recognition terms as well as have a working knowledge of optimal instructional methods and materials needed to teach students to be efficient users of the alphabetic principle.

While the National Reading Panel (NICHD 2000) has emphasized that phonics should be taught systematically and explicitly to kindergarteners and first graders, this same panel suggested, "young children should be solidifying their knowledge of the alphabet, engaging in phonemic awareness activities, listening to stories and informational texts read aloud to them, reading texts (both aloud and silently), and writing letters, words, messages, and stories" (Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement 2001, 15). Members of the National Reading Panel, like other noted literacy experts (e.g., Cooper 2000; Cunningham and Allington 2003; Fountas and Pinnell 1996;

Tompkins 2003; Vacca et al. 2003), have advocated for a balanced literacy program in the classroom.

Based on a learner's literacy needs and the text being read, a variety of decoding strategies (sight words, phonics, contextual analysis, structural analysis) should be taught and employed. When approaching a new word in a text, the learner should be questioning: "Should I reread and think about what would make sense?" "Does it look right and sound right?" "Why did I stop?" No one technique is effective for decoding every unknown word. When a child can decide on his or her own the most efficient and effective approach, then the various decoding skills become decoding strategies.

Fluency

Another skills topic that teachers should include in their literacy instruction is reading fluency. Braunger and Lewis (2006), Calkins (2001), Cooper (2000), Ellery (2005), Harp and Brewer (2005), Prescott-Griffin and Witherell (2004), and Tompkins (2003) not only have defined reading fluency, but also have described optimal instructional practices to increase a student's fluent reading. Reading "fluency represents a level of expertise in combining appropriate phrasing and intonation while reading words automatically" (Ellery 2005, 77). Fluent reading is much more than fast, accurate reading. "Truly fluent reading conveys the reader's understanding of content through expressive, interpretive reading of text" (Prescott-Griffin and Witherell 2004, 3).

When a child becomes a fluent reader, he or she spends less time focusing on decoding words and more time attending to the meaning of the text. Teachers should provide various opportunities for students to increase their fluent reading skills. Table 1 depicts several relevant fluency techniques. No matter which fluency practices a teacher chooses to implement, educators must realize that frequent teaching of fluency techniques will improve the reading achievement of each student within a classroom (Harp and Brewer 2005, 293).

Vocabulary

For students to decode and fluently read words in a text is vital; yet, also important is for learners to understand the meaning of specific contextual words. "A reader who knows a word, can recognize it, understand it, and use that understanding with other types of knowledge to construct meaning of a text" (Nagy and Scott 2000, 281) is truly comprehending a text. The instructor's role is to assist students in discovering the meaning of relevant and key words found in a text.

Teachers can choose from many effective strategies for vocabulary instruction (see Table 2 on page 62). Regardless of the specific technique an instructor or a student uses for vocabulary practice, the focus words should connect directly to the learner's current word knowledge and to the context of the specific text the student is reading.

Table 1.
Techniques to Increase Students' Reading Fluency Skills

Repeated Reading	Rereading a book or book excerpt three to five times.
Choral Reading and Readers' Theater	Dramatic oral rereading of a poem, narrative, or expository text.
Phrasing Techniques	Practice reading several words before pausing, and recognition that punctuation marks ending a sentence require a pause and sometimes an inflection in one's voice.
Whisper Reading	Quiet, individual rereading of a text aloud.
Partner Reading	Sharing the oral reading/rereading of a text with another student and providing feedback regarding each partner's oral reading.
Fluency Flexors	Short, focused exercises in reading, rereading, and rehearsing sentences or short passages to convey different meanings

Prescott-Griffin and Witherell 2004, 75

Comprehension

"Students must comprehend what they are reading in order to learn from the experience, make sense of their reading in order to maintain interest, . . . and derive pleasure from reading to become lifelong readers" (Tompkins 2003, 247). Classroom instructors must model and directly teach students specific strategies that will enable them not only to understand the meaning of individual words, but also to comprehend the meaning of the entire text. Comprehension skills

should be taught and applied before, during, and after reading takes place.

Table 2.
Vocabulary Development Techniques

Semantic Mapping	Creating connected categories of words (Heimlich and Pittelman 1986).
Semantic Feature Analysis	Using a grid to compare attributes of specific words (Pittelman et al. 1991).
Synonym and Antonym Selection	Activating one's prior knowledge of a word or using a dictionary or thesaurus to extend word meaning (Tompkins 2003).
Word Sorts	Placing words connected to each other in specific categories (Hoyt 2002).
Concept Circles	Dividing a circle into four quadrants and listing specific words or phrases from a text (Vacca et al. 2003).
Analogies	Pointing out relationships among words (Vacca et al. 2003).
Predict-o-grams	Combining words, phrases, places, and dates to predict story plots and character relationships (Vacca et al. 2003).
Vocabulary Self-Selection Strategy	Self-selecting words for vocabulary study and stating specific reasons for choosing these words (Haggard 1986).

Before students begin to read, teachers should provide activities to trigger students' prior knowledge for the text type, the content, or theme of the text. The importance of prior knowledge to literacy learning and comprehension is linked to *schema theory*, the influence of past experiences and knowledge upon the interpretation of present happenings. Various prior knowledge activities in which students could participate are described in Table 3. Once relevant prior knowledge has been activated, the teacher could choose to focus on key vocabulary concepts and terms that are paramount for understanding the text. This entire pre-reading stage should conclude with the teacher stating a purpose for reading or posing a question that could be answered during the reading task. "The reading process does not begin as readers open a book and read the first sentence. The first stage is preparing to read" (Tompkins 2003, 33).

Table 3.
Prior Knowledge Activities

Preview and Predict	Using key features of a narrative or expository text to predict key elements of a text.
Story Map Prediction	Applying the narrative story schema (characters, setting, problem, plot, resolution) to a novel text.
KWL Strategy	Reflecting and brainstorming what the reader knows, wishes to discover, and then learned in an expository text (Ogle 1986).
Quick Writes	Writing for approximately five minutes to share prior understanding of the theme of a narrative text or main topic of an expository text (Marino, Gould, and Haas 1985).
Semantic Mapping	Creating connected categories of words for an important concept in an expository text (Pearson and Johnson 1978).
Picture Walks and Text Walks	Using illustrations to predict the text's action in a narrative text or various text features to predict key topics in an expository text.
Anticipation Guide	Answering several brief questions regarding the expository or narrative text the students will be reading (Readence, Bean, and Baldwin 1989).

Once prior knowledge has been activated, new vocabulary words discussed, and a purpose or question for reading established, then reading the text commences. Teachers modeling this second stage can be valuable through "think alouds" (Davey 1983), their own strategic or active reading of a particular text. Strategic readers think about their reading as they read, "determining important ideas, . . . making inferences, . . . and asking questions" (Harvey and Goudvis 2000, 16). Also, strategic readers apply "fix-up" strategies when the text they are reading does not make sense to them (Calkins 2001). Instructors should specifically teach relevant comprehension strategies that students could employ during reading (see Table 4). "A clear knowledge of comprehension strategies combined with an awareness of when and how to use them can provide [readers] . . . with an arsenal of tactics to ensure that they construct meaning as they read" (Harvey and Goudvis 2000, 17).

Table 4.
Techniques to Use during Reading Activities

Making Connections	Text-to-self, text-to-text, text-to-world connections (Harvey and Goudvis 2000).
Visualization	The creation of pictures in one's mind based upon the text context.
Questioning Techniques	
Reciprocal Questioning	A procedure in which the teacher and the student take turns asking and answering questions (Manzo 1969).
Question-Answer Relationships	The construction of various questions, ranging from the literal to evaluative levels of comprehension (Raphael 1982).
Questioning the Author	A mental questioning procedure between the reader and the author (Beck et al. 1997).
Reciprocal Teaching	A discussion format in which the teacher and students take turns generating questions, summarizing the text, clarifying difficult text parts, and predicting the topic or action of the next text section (Palincsar and Brown 1984).
Directed Reading-Thinking Activity	An instructional procedure in which students are taught to predict what the author will say, read to confirm or revise predictions, and elaborate text responses (Stauffer 1969).

The third stage of text comprehension involves post-reading activities. After reading, students are given the opportunity to reflect and respond to the text, "allowing the connections between the stories they read and the stories of their lives to change their understanding of both" (Calkins 2001, 523). "There are many different ways to encourage and support students as they respond to literature, and each procedure has a special function" (Cooper 2000, 304). Students could respond to their reading through writing, discussion, dramatic activities, and extended research (see Table 5). "Responding is what one does as a result of and/or as a part of reading, writing, or listening. . . . Responding is part of the natural process of constructing meaning" (Cooper 2000, 29).

Table 5.
Techniques for Reader Response

Written Response (For Fiction and Nonfiction Texts)	
Diaries and Response Journals	Personal reactions to and reflections about reading.
Dialogue Journals	A written conversation between the reader and teacher or the reader and a peer.
Double-Entry Journals	A combined summary of and reflection about the reading.
Discussion (For Fiction and Nonfiction Texts)	
Book Clubs	Small group, student-led discussions regarding a text read by the students (McMahon et al. 1997).
Literature Circles	Students facilitate the oral discourse, with the teacher serving as an observer and guide (Daniels 2002; Johnson and Freedman 2005).
Discussion Webs	Students debate a controversial question regarding the text (Alvermann 1991).
Dramatic Activities (For Fiction and NonfictionTexts)	
Readers' Theater	A dramatic reading of the text either in a commercially prepared script, or a script composed by the students.
Extended Research (Nonfiction)	Continued and personally extended exploration regarding the particular text topic the student just read (Harvey 1998).

Diverse Learners

To provide a classroom instructional program and environment where each student can be a successful learner, teachers should know their students well. Instructors should present a balanced literacy program "in which students have opportunities for both discovery and direct instruction" (Cooper 2000, 25). The program should include varied occasions for direct reading and language arts instruction with the whole class together as well as in small flexible, guided-reading groups (Fountas and Pinnell 1996, 2001). Also, daily times should be set aside for the teacher

to read aloud to the students, for the instructor and the students to share the reading of a literary work together, and for the students to explore literacy materials of their own choosing and at their own independent reading levels. Likewise, the program should offer a variety of writing opportunities for students: shared writing, guided writing, collaborative or cooperative writing, and independent writing (Cooper 2000; Vacca et al. 2003).

Teachers should recognize and honor the linguistic, cultural, and cognitive diversity of each learner. The gap between reading achievement of students of diverse backgrounds and the mainstream population is a greater cause for concern today than in the past because of the changing demographics in the United States (Au 2002). Teachers should be cognizant of the aspects of culture and language that "can have a significant impact on how a student responds to classroom discussion and activity" (Vogt and Shearer 2003, 125). Instructors should research the cultures and discourse patterns of their students and should deliver learning experiences and materials that honor and respect these students' languages and cultures.

For each student to succeed and learn, teachers should provide classroom instruction and classroom materials that are multileveled (Cunningham and Allington 2003). A variety of grouping patterns (whole class; small, cooperative groups; partner work; flexible, guided-reading, instructional groups) should be employed daily to provide the optimal educational setting for each learner. Instructional materials should be chosen carefully (and hopefully available in the school) and should represent published programs such as basal readers, authentic and varied literature sources, and different software programs, as well as the use of the Internet. In this way, students can interact with a variety of materials based on their cognitive, linguistic, and cultural needs, as well as their various learning styles. Additionally, teachers should be prepared and willing to work cooperatively and collaboratively with a variety of school specialists to provide an optimal and complete instructional program for each student.

Assessment

"[Daily,] teachers use a variety of literacy assessment tools and procedures to monitor and document students' reading and writing development" (Tompkins 2003, 72). This ongoing authentic assessment takes a variety of forms (see Table 6). No matter which form of authentic assessment a teacher chooses to employ, the purpose of this assessment is to ascertain students' skills and learning and to inform present and future instruction. Effective assessment should be "an ongoing process, . . . an integral part of instruction, . . . multidimensional, . . . developmentally and culturally appropriate, . . . and based upon what we know about how students learn to read and write" (Cooper 2000, 561–62).

Table 6.
Authentic Assessment Measures

Anecdotal Notes (Written Teacher Observations)	To acknowledge what teachers know about how children learn to read and write.
Checklists	To aid the teacher's observations of students and to help the instructor ascertain students' literacy needs and growth.
Rubrics (Commercially Prepared or Teacher Created)	To measure students' oral and written literacy needs.
Surveys	To ascertain students' attitudes, interests, and motivation regarding reading and writing.
Running Records, Miscue Analyses, and Informal Reading Inventories	To ascertain students' oral reading skills.
Oral and Written Story Retellings	To informally measure students' reading comprehension.
Literacy Portfolios	To showcase students' oral and written processes, products, and skills.

Besides knowing about a variety of authentic, informal assessment measures, teachers also should be knowledgeable of formal assessment means. Generally, there are grades and report cards. "Nearly all schools continue to give grades . . . and in most instances the report card system does not match the assessment plan they have implemented" (Cooper 2000, 558). Teachers feel a tremendous pressure to keep grades and to periodically report this information to their students' families. "Grading is a narrow, arbitrary measuring system that fosters competition, discourages cooperation, and does little to promote understanding" (Routman 1991, 333). No matter how teachers personally feel about grades and report cards, they should keep accurate records of their students' work and should use this information to identify their students' strengths and needs as well as to inform their classroom instruction.

Along with grades and report cards, standardized tests are another formal measure of student achievement. "Pressures for accountability have led many school

districts and states to use formal reading tests [norm-referenced and criterion-referenced] as a means of assessment" (Vacca et al. 2003, 136). Though state tests often are closely connected to state curriculum standards and frameworks, standards-based state assessment measures and other formal standardized tests have been criticized for not reflecting the full range of students' cultural backgrounds and the curriculum being taught in the classroom. Also, standardized tests "impose a limiting effect on classroom teaching" (Cooper 2000, 528).

Regardless of teachers' opinions of the kind of skills and knowledge being assessed by formal assessment measures, teachers should be aware of different types of standardized tests that are available today and should be knowledgeable of specific terms associated with standardized tests: raw score, grade equivalency score, percentile score, standard score, reliability, and validity (Vacca et al. 2003). "We are a nation obsessed with the belief that the path to school improvement is paved with better, more frequent, and more intense standardized testing" (Stiggins 2002, 759). Thus, standardized testing will probably be part of teaching, education, and schools for a long time.

Closing **Thoughts**

Teaching children how to read involves a balance of pedagogy, theory, and practical classroom experiences. The process involves patience and a love of children. Becoming an exemplary teacher of reading evolves over time. New teachers need more than a broad knowledge base regarding optimal instructional practices, the diversity of student learners, relevant skills instruction, and appropriate and varied assessment practices. Both novice and experienced teachers must be willing to extend their present knowledge regarding literacy education by constantly researching and learning about innovative and commendable literacy practices, theories, and policies. Calkins (2001, 15) summed up the challenge in teaching children how to read:

> *It is important to give our students the words that will help them read actively, but it is even more important to invite then to become active readers. If we want children to read with wide-awake minds, then we need to invite them to live in this way in the dailiness of our classrooms. Teaching reading, then, is like teaching living.*

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